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ABSTRACT

Neurological research indicates that children's experiences, both inside and outside of school, significantly influence brain development. But little is known about children's out-of-school activities and the influence such activities may have on academic achievement. To better understand this relationship, the extra-school activities of 75 fifth-grade students with below average academic achievement and who attended a semi-rural school are reported here. The instrument which measured the children's activity was administered daily to the children for one week. The findings indicate that watching television was by far the most prevalent activity. When combined with watching videotapes and playing video games, television watching surpassed all other reasonable combination of activities. Reading received a low-activity index rating, but it was third in the children's best-liked category. The best-liked activity was playing outside. Activities pursued with parents during the week and the weekend varied. Activities in the category titled "other" included eating dinner, sleeping, going to church, and using personal computers. The findings support other studies that show that children watch television too much and read too little. (RJM)

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ACTION RESEARCH: HOW CHILDREN IN THE FIFTH GRADE SPEND THEIR TIME OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL

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Neurological research indicates that children's experiences, both in-and-out of school, significantly influence brain development. For neurons to make connections, they must be activated through experience. Some interactive experiences, such as playing imaginative games in the woods or visualizing characters when reading a story, result in brain cells being produced for particular purposes. As shown in brain-imaging studies for example, practicing a musical instrument has been seen to produce additional neural connections. During the formative years of childhood a sensitive interaction between genetic proclivities and environmental experience occurs. Not all experiences, however, produce positive results. Deprivation or alteration of needed experiences can produce a range of deficits since children require certain types of interactive emotional experiences geared to their particular developmental needs (Greenspan, 1997).

From an educational perspective, the neurological research being conducted leads to the question of what types of experience are most helpful to a child's growing intellect. Since children spend more time outside of formal educational environments than they do in them, the additional question of how children spend their time outside of school takes on critical importance. Unfortunately, few studies have provided information on how children spend their time outside of school. This study, involving a classroom teacher and a university professor who collaborated together as action researchers, investigated how 75 fifth grade students attending a simi-rural county school with below average academic achievement spend their time when not in school.

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The children participating in this study attend a school in East Central Mississippi with an enrollment of 840 students in grades 5-8 during the 1996-97 school year. Composition of the student body was 55 percent white, 43 percent African American, and 2 percent other minorities. Approximately 52 percent of the students qualified for free or reduced lunches.

Although we have learned much about how children spend time in school, little is known about children's out-of-school activities and the influence they may have on academic achievement. Few researchers have investigated how children spend their time outside of school in terms of intellectually stimulating activities, physical exercise, creative play, or talking with adults. Only two studies could be found in a literature search addressing how children spend their time outside of school.

A study conducted by Anderson, Fielding, and Wilson (1988) investigated the relationship between the amount of children's outside reading and reading achievement by having 155 fifth-grade students who participated write down every day how many minutes they spent on a wide range of out-of-school activities. The researchers found that among all the ways children spend their time, reading books was the best predictor of reading achievement. On most days, however, the majority of children did little or no reading.

In the other study, Jones and Blendinger (1997) investigated how 205 kindergarten through fourth grade African-American children in two rural low-socioeconomic schools noted for low academic achievement spend their time when not in school. They found:

1. Watching television was the most prevalent activity.
2. Electronic activities--watching television, watching videotapes, and playing video games--surpassed any other reasonable combination of activities (e.g., playing inside and outside the home).

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3. Reading received a relatively high rating but cautioned that the rating might be higher than it normally would be because the children in the study were also involved in an 18 month school-home reading program.

4. Doing homework also received a relatively high rating during the week. but dropped down during the weekend.

5. Watching television was generally the best-liked activity.

6. Activities done with parents during the week and the weekend varied according to the grade level, but watching television, however, was more prevalent than any other activity.

Jones and Blendinger concluded that the outside-of-school activity pattern reported by the African-American children from two rural low-achieving schools indicated the children watched television too much and read too little.

The Jones and Blendinger findings are consistent with research addressing television viewing. Studies reveal that both children and adults spend many hours per week watching television. Americans have more free time today than they did in 1965 and the largest single share of this leisure time (15 hours) is being consumed by television. Elementary school-age children are heavy viewers, spending on average 27 hours per week watching television. Forty-two percent of the respondents in a survey of 1,340 children and youth, aged 6-17, reported having cable or satellite television hookups in their bedrooms (Raphael, 1997).

Television interferes with interaction among family members. After reviewing the research addressing the impact of television on the family, Comstock (1978) concluded that television viewing increases the privatization of experience because it becomes the framework within which human interaction occurs due to the large number of hours that the television is on each day in the average household.

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Research Design

Our investigation may best be described as a descriptive case study. To investigate the out-of-school behavior of the children involved in this study, we used the procedures and instrument developed by Jones and Blendinger (1997). The subjects for the study were 75 children in grade five who were students in a semi-rural middle school.

The instrument used to collect data was specifically designed for gathering information about how children spend their time outside of school from Monday through Sunday. It was administered daily to the children for a period of one week.

The instrument listed ten mutually exclusive activities and an "other" category which provided an opportunity for the children to name activities in addition to those listed. The ten categories were:

1. Playing outside
2. Playing inside
3. Games and puzzles
4. Watching television
5. Reading
6. Watching videotapes
7. Paying videogames
8. Doing household chores
9. Doing homework
10. Shopping

An icon (picture symbolizing the word) accompanied the words for each activity. The reason for including icons in addition to the words was to assist children who may have difficulty reading.

The form of the instrument used to collect data for the weekday (Monday-Thursday) activities differed slightly form the form used to collect data for the weekend (Friday-Sunday) activities. The weekday form was divided into one-hour time periods ranging from 3:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. The weekend form was designed to gather information about the activities in which children engaged

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in during the weekend and provided larger time blocks. The weekday form was first administered on Tuesday and dealt with children's activities after school on Monday. The weekend form was administered on the following Monday and addressed Children's activities during the weekend. In addition to investigating the activities that children engaged in during the week and on the weekend, we also asked:

1. Of all the activities you circled, what did you like to do best?
2. What activities do you like to do with your parents during the week?
3. What activities do you like to do with your parents during the weekend?

In order to insure consistency in data collection, the action researchers adhered to a specific written protocol. The forms were completed by the children during the week in of April 6-13 designated for the study. On Monday of that week before the children went home, the researchers prepared them for the study. They told the children to think about what they do after school and in the evening because the first thing they would do when they came to school in the morning was complete an activity form about what they did outside of school. For example: What do they do right after they get home form school (3:00-4:00 p.m.)? After they have been home about an hour (4:00-5:00 p.m.)? What do they do before dinner (5:00-6:00 p.m.)? The researchers gave examples and instructed the children they would need to think about when they start and stop doing things. This same procedure was repeated each day.

To analyze the data collected, the total number of times the children reported doing a particular activity (e.g., watching television) during the week and on the weekend was tabulated. A proportional value was given to each activity by dividing the tabulated total for a particular activity by the total number computed for all activities (excluding the other category). This

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process provided an *activity index rating* that made it possible to make comparisons among activities, from the most to the least.

For want of benchmarks with which to compare our findings, we aggregated the data presented by Jones and Blendinger (1997), who had reported their findings by grade levels, to produce a new set of means. This approach enabled us to identify the five out-of-school activities the 205 students in the Jones and Blendinger study engaged in the most. The five activities having the highest aggregated means for each of five categories--weekday, weekend, best liked, done with parents during the week, and done with parents during the weekend--were as follows:

Weekday Activities	Mean
1. Watching television	30.66
2. Doing homework	13.00
3. Reading books for pleasure	11.66
4. Playing inside the house	10.58
5. Doing chores	7.34

The combined scores of videogames, videotapes, and television had a rating of 45.02

Weekend Activities	Mean
1. Watching television	27.74
2. Playing outside	17.67
3. Playing inside the house	8.48
4. Watching videotapes	8.37
5. Reading books for pleasure	8.13

The combined scores of videogames, videotapes, and television were 42.50

Best Liked Activities	Mean
1. Watching television	31.94
2. Reading books for pleasure	14.03
3. Playing inside the house	8.93
4. Doing homework	8.79
5. Playing videogames	8.37

Activities Done With Parents During the Week	Mean
1. Watching television	27.27
2. Reading books for pleasure	24.24
3. Shopping	12.84
4. Doing homework	10.56
5. Watching videotapes	10.29

Activities Done With Parents During the Weekend	Mean
1. Watching television	34.33
2. Shopping	14.09
3. Reading books for pleasure	12.91
4. Doing chores	8.05
5. Playing outside	7.10

Although the above mentioned configured data represents an interpolation of the findings presented in the Jones and Blendinger (1997) study, the configuration, nevertheless, appears to have some validity because the results are essentially what might be expected. For example, television dominated the activities, reading for pleasure made the top five activities because the children were involved in a special school-home reading project, more homework was done during the week than on weekends, and playing outside more on weekends exceeded playing outside during the week. Caution, however, must be exercised in giving too much credibility to the interpolated data since we condensed five sets of data representing five grade levels into one aggregated set.

Findings and Discussion

Data collected are displayed in Table 1 which shows the number of times a particular activity was indicated by the children and its index rating. Numerical scores and index ratings are also presented for (a) best-liked activities, (b) activities done with parents during the week, and (c) activities done with parents on the weekend. Table 1 is presented on the following page.

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TABLE 1: HOW FIFTH GRADE CHILDREN SPEND TIME OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL IN SELECTED ACTIVITIES BY NUMBER OF TIMES AND PROPORTIONAL VALUE

Playing Outside	Playing Inside	Games and Puzzles	Watching TV	Reading	Watching Videotapes	Playing Video Games	Doing Chores	Doing Homework	Shopping	Total
Weekdays										
429	181	40	466	127	107	132	140	280	41	1,943
22.08	9.32	2.06	23.98	6.54	5.35	6.79	7.21	14.41	2.11	100%
Weekend										
162	68	10	182	26	37	45	50	30	25	635
25.51	10.71	1.57	28.66	4.09	5.83	7.09	7.87	4.72	3.94	100%
Best Liked Activities										
30	1	0	12	9	0	9	1	4	4	70
42.86	1.43	0	17.14	12.86	0	12.86	1.43	5.71	5.71	100%
Activities Done With Parents During the Week										
20	6	10	29	6	24	10	3	4	21	133
15.04	4.51	7.52	21.80	4.51	18.04	7.52	2.26	3.01	15.79	100%
Activities Done With Parents on the Weekend										
17	9	7	29	4	7	8	9	4	23	117
14.53	7.69	5.98	24.79	3.42	5.98	6.84	7.69	3.42	19.66	100%

The findings presented in the table indicate the following:

1. Watching television was the most prevalent activity

2. Electronic activities--watching television, watching videotapes, and playing video games--surpassed any other reasonable combination of activities (e.g., playing inside and outside the home).

3. Reading received a relatively low activity index rating, but placed third in the best-liked category. It is difficult to advance a reason why the children said they liked reading for pleasure as an activity but didn't read much outside of school.

4. With the exception of watching television, playing outside homework received high activity index ratings.

5. Playing outside was the best-liked activity.

6. Activities done with parents during the week and the weekend varied, but watching television, however, was more prevalent than other activities.

7. Activities mentioned in the category titled "other" varied. The most frequently mentioned activities were sleeping, eating dinner, going to church, baseball practice, gymnastics, and using personal computers.

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It is interesting to note that television viewing ranked at the top of the list in both our study and the study conducted by Jones and Blendinger (1997). The children in our study, however, were more involved in outside play such as baseball, gymnastics, riding bicycles, etc. Also, the children in this study engaged in reading for pleasure much less than did the children in the other study. This finding may be due to the fact that the children in the Jones and Blendinger study were involved in a planned 18 month school-home reading project.

Neuman (1988) suggested that watching television may affect students' reading achievement bY displacing activities crucial to the development of reading skills, such as leisure reading. Although Greenfield (1990) found that the visual imagery presented by the video media cultivated cognitive skills such as visual literacy and accessing information, She also found it had negative consequences such as dulling imagination, suppressing mental effort, and decreasing memory. Greenfield believes that children need to be educated to understand the conventions of visual literacy as well as print media. That is, students must be taught selective viewing just as they are instructed in elements of good literature.

Implications

Our findings in this study are similar to those reported by Jones and Blendinger (1997) and support their contention children read little outside of school in comparison to watching television. The outside-of-school activity pattern reported appears to substantiate the thesis that *children watch television too much and read too little.*

Because television viewing is a privatizing experience and much time is devoted to this media, children are spending less time engaged in meaningful interaction with adults and peers. America is becoming an increasingly

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screen-oriented society. In addition to television viewing, children spend a significant amount of time watching videotapes, playing video games, and working on computers. Traditionally teachers have equated literacy and education with printed material, but the relatively new area of visual literacy is fast developing in our society. Educators must address this realm of literacy as well as print media.

In order for formal education to be most efficient, children's informal educational experience must be taken into account. This is where children engage with the real world. To balance the inequities in media experience outside of school, teachers and administrators will have to make a concerted effort to work with parents on a continual basis and develop programs that require active parent participation in children's literacy development through reading and selective television viewing at home.

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